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ABSTRACT

A task was developed to allow young children to demonstrate their understanding of opposite-valence simultaneous emotions. A total of 69 children in grades K, 2, 4, and 6 heard eight very brief stories describing everyday events expected to arouse conflicting feelings toward a single target. For four of the stories, subjects were asked to detect how the protagonist felt. For the other four, the experimenter revealed the protagonist's dual feelings and asked the subjects to explain why both positive and negative feelings were aroused. Story version was counterbalanced for all children, and story content was rotated over versions according to a balanced Latin-square design. Although older children performed better than younger, children at every age level could successfully explain why the characters had conflicting feelings. After having to explain dual emotions, even the youngest children spontaneously detected conflicting feelings more often than did children who had not yet been asked to explain instances of opposing feelings. Results were interpreted as indicating that young children often understand what it means to have conflicting feelings but may not spontaneously talk about them. (Author/RH)

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Young Children's Understanding of Simultaneous Conflicting Emotions

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Abstract

A task was developed to allow young children to demonstrate their understanding of opposite-valence simultaneous emotions. Sixty-nine children in grades K, 2, 4, and 6 heard eight stories describing everyday events expected to arouse conflicting feelings toward a single target. In four of the stories subjects were asked to tell (detect) how the protagonist felt. For the remaining four, the experimenter revealed the protagonist's dual feelings and asked the subjects to explain why both positive and negative feelings were aroused. Although older children performed better overall than younger, children at every age level could successfully explain why the characters felt conflicting feelings. Furthermore, after having to explain dual emotions, even the youngest children, perhaps becoming more aware of the protagonists' feelings, spontaneously detected conflicting feelings more often than children who had not yet been asked to explain instances of opposing feelings. The results were interpreted as indicating that young children often understand what it means to have conflicting feelings but may not spontaneously talk about them.

Young Children's Understanding of Simultaneous Conflicting Feelings

How children think about emotional states has recently intrigued many who study emotional development (eg. Harris, 1985). One topic, awareness of simultaneous conflicting feelings, particularly the question of when children recognize such conflicting feelings, has produced conflicting opinions. Harter and her colleagues (Harter, 1982; Harter & Buddin, 1987) and Harris (Harris, 1983, 1985) have concluded that children do not understand that one can experience both a positive and negative feeling about one event until the age of about 10 or so. However, Stein and Trabasso (in press) and Donaldson and Westerman (1986) have argued that this age estimate may be too high. These discrepant interpretations might be due to differences in the cognitive operations and attentional processes demanded of subjects in the various studies. In the current study, we developed a procedure that heightened awareness of conflicting feelings. We predicted that this would sensitize young children to such feelings and increase the likelihood that they would subsequently recognize them.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 69 middle-class children in kindergarten, second, fourth and sixth grades. The mean ages in months were 68, 90.4, 115.9, and 135.5.

Materials

Eight brief, one or two sentences, stories depicting everyday events designed to arouse two opposite-valence feelings to a single target (Harter and Buddin's [1987] combination D), were prepared in two versions. The Detect version contained only the story events, and the subject was asked to "detect" how the story protagonist felt (Today is Kate's last day of school. How does she feel?). In the Explain version, the experimenter revealed the protagonist's opposing feelings after relating the story events and asked the children to explain them (It was the last day of school, and a girl named Kate said to me, "You know, I feel sad, but at the same time I feel happy about school being over." Could you explain why she feels both happy and sad?).

Procedure

Every child heard eight different stories, four in each version, detect and explain. Story version was counterbalanced over children, and story content was rotated over versions according to a balanced Latin-Square design.

Results

As can be seen in Figure 1, older children performed better

Insert Figure 1 about here

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than younger on both the Detect and Explain versions, $F(3,61) = 9.02$, $p < .0001$. Figure 1 also shows that children at each age

explained conflicting feelings in significantly more stories than they spontaneously detected them, $F(1,61) = 187.61$, $p < .0001$. Indeed, kindergarten children explained conflicting feelings in a mean of 3.0 (of a possible 4) stories, with 75% of the kindergartners explaining dual emotions in 3 or more stories. There was also a significant Order x Story-Version interaction, $F(1,61) = 11.37$, $p = .001$, which is displayed in Figure 2. If they had already heard stories in the Explain version, children were more likely to spontaneously name conflicting feelings for the remaining stories they heard in the Detect version.

Insert Figure 2 about here

Discussion

We interpret these findings as showing that young children can recognize and explain simultaneous opposite-valence emotions about some situations. Even kindergartners could cogently explain, without probing, why one might feel happy and sad about the last day of school or about having a party when ones best friend can't come. Children were able to offer explanations even when the story itself (for example, the one about the last day of school) contained almost no grounds they could use directly to supply reasons. This performance appears to satisfy criteria for Harter and Buddin's (1987) highest level in the acquisition sequence of simultaneity of two emotions.

The significant order effect demonstrates that our procedure of asking children to explain opposing emotions heightened awareness of conflicting feelings. The Explain versions modeled giving two emotions. Thus when they subsequently responded to the Detect versions, the children understood, without being explicitly told, that two different feelings were acceptable and even expected. Perhaps this motivated a more exhaustive search of internal memory processes (Harris, 1985) leading to the superior performance of these young children compared to subjects in other studies.

Conclusions

1. Children in our study recognized and explained conflicting emotions at a younger age than has been reported before by other studies with different methods.

2. That performance improved significantly after merely asking children to explain instances of conflicting emotions supports our conclusion that young children are more sensitive to opposing positive and negative feelings than has been previously claimed.

3. Young children may not spontaneously mention dual feelings unless primed in some way by either experimenters or parents.

4. In situations where they could be expected to experience ambivalent emotions, such as toward a sibling or parent, young children are likely to understand adult reference to such feelings even if they themselves do not spontaneously comment about them.

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Level of Awareness by Grade

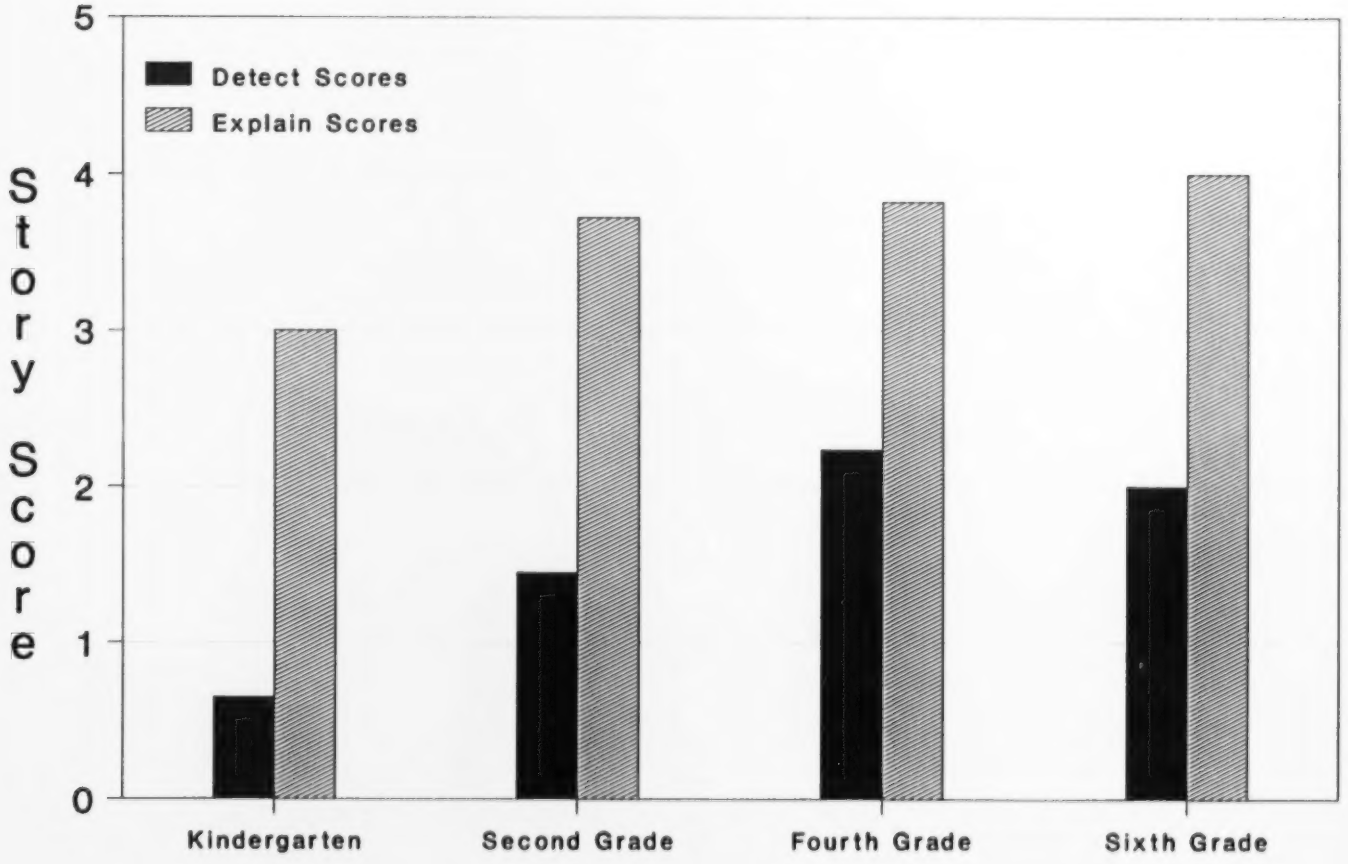

Figure 1

Effect of Question Order on Scores

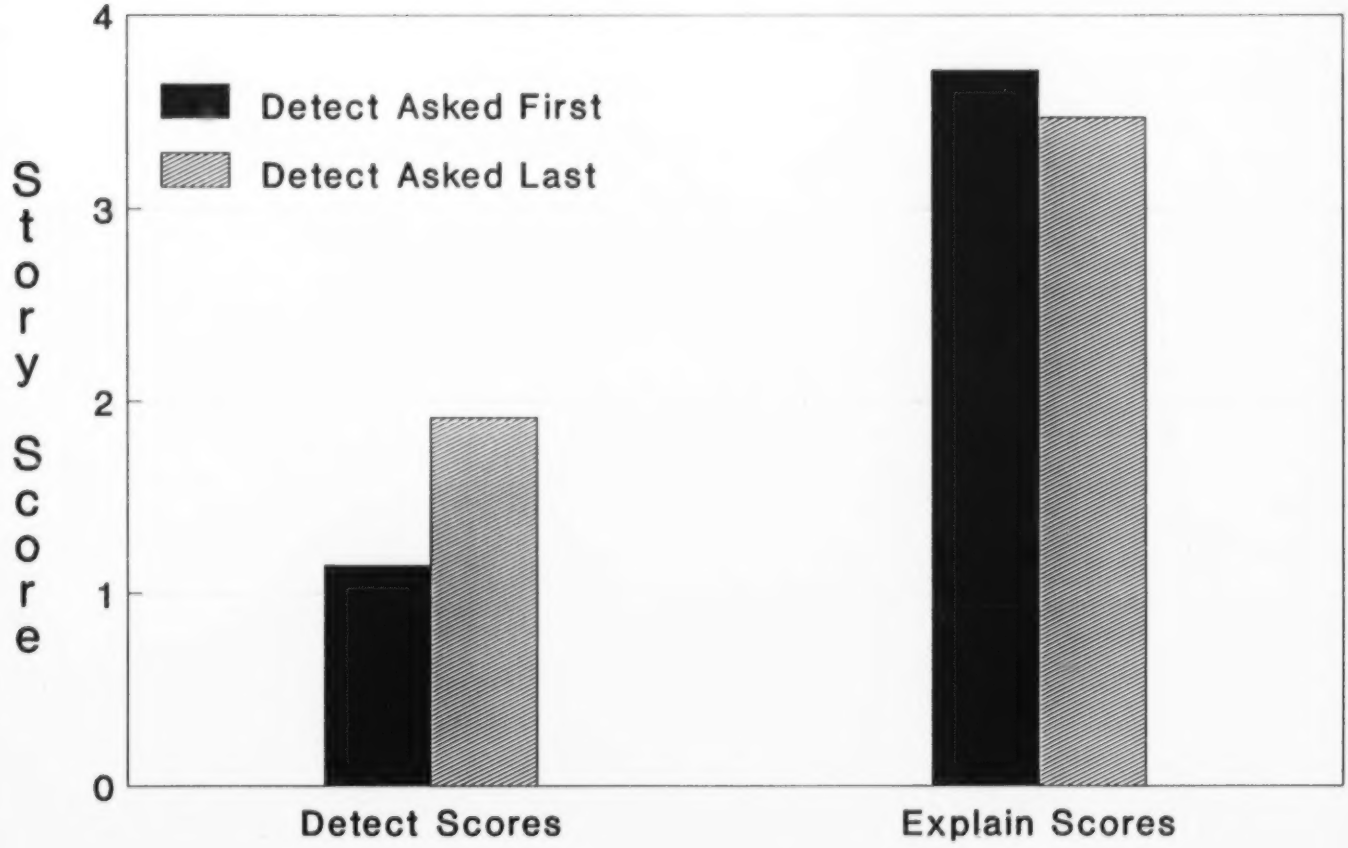

Figure 2